

Social and Emotional Learning Trends Before, During, and After the Pandemic

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[Abstract] This article presents the insights gained in a study about how the SEL curriculum, *Second Step*, when explicitly taught in grades K-1, is effective and contributes to the overall well-being and mental health of the children participating in the classroom study. This six-week study focused on the explicit teaching of the Second Step curriculum, focusing on executive functioning, peer-relationships, empathy, self-regulation and problem solving. Pre-and post-surveys were given to the teachers and students. The children in grades K-1 were learning to read and write and their heart-felt expression of social and emotional learning concepts were displayed in their artwork and drawings. The outcomes of these mixed methods phenomenological research indicated the significant benefits of SEL programs. Recommendations on how a classroom teacher, para-educator or onsite school counselor can contribute to the overall success of a school's SEL programs are presented.

[keywords] social and emotional learning, Jean Piaget, Second Step*

Introduction

For most American school age children, their weekday morning, lunchtime, and afternoon waking hours are spent at school. At this age, peer relationships are important. For the classroom teacher, the love and joy of inspiring young minds is what brings them into the teaching profession. "Teachers have many roles: instructor, advocate, mentor, nurse, social worker, authority figure ... the list could go on. Perhaps our most crucial role, though, is one for which we have no word (at least not in English), that of the person whose mission is to build relationships" (Vogt & Monroe, 2021, para 4). Alongside this responsibility to support learning, teachers typically find themselves spending much of their day not only teaching but solving students' social related problems. And yet, teachers must be attuned to the needs of their students as well as achieve the goals of the grade level standards.

According to a timely report by Pew Research Center, "About 1 in 5 teachers surveyed said major problems include students getting up and walking around when they're not supposed to and students being disrespectful" (Long, 2024, para. 3). Teachers are required to address these unexpected or persistent problems and restore a peaceful classroom learning environment. "Children look to adults to protect them from the excesses of more aggressive peers" (Tattum, 1993, pp. 3-14).

This study (Caldwell, 2025) explored if children in grades K-1 demonstrate social and emotional understanding when taught the Second Step Curriculum (Committee for Children, 2002, 2011). The Second Step curriculum includes Social Emotional Learning (SEL) concepts and strategies for better social interactions and mental health. The curriculum comes in a digital format and as kit boxes. The grade level kits include picture cards, posters, and for grades K-1 hand

puppets. Each picture card has a scripted lesson on the back, so that teachers and educators can refer to this information during their presentations.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Jean Piaget's Developmental Theory (1969), whose work and research with children were progressive for the time and had significant implications for future education of children (D'Orio, 1999). Piaget's levels of Developmental Theory became the classic benchmark to gauge curriculum development for educators. Instructions based on this theory were specific to age. Children's capacity for learning was quantified, and teachers were given guidelines in educational theory and philosophy to predetermine outcomes or have a view in mind of what they could accomplish at what grade level (Duckworth, 1964). Today's benchmarks and *standards* consider what a child should achieve at certain intervals of the year, as well as know by the end of each grade level year.

This study asserts that when Jean Piaget's Developmental Theory (Piaget, 1969) is combined with the explicit teaching of concepts offered by the Second Step Curriculum a positive outcome of children's behavior will occur. This freedom and cognitive expression are pivotal for increasing the overall well-being of a child. The Second Step curriculum provides the psychological framework to support children's overall school social functionality and well-being. The researcher suggests that God created children with the capacity for wonderment and creative exploration of the world around them. The researcher also asserts that children in grades K-1 can be taught and learn social-emotional principles relative to their developmental stage.

The research took place on an elementary school campus in Southern California. Three teachers volunteered to participate in the field study which allowed the researcher to teach social and emotional learning lessons in their classrooms. The teachers represented one kindergarten class and two first grade classes. Seventy-two students participated in four 20-minute Second Step grade level appropriate social emotional learning lessons during the months of March and April 2024 taught by the researcher. Pre- and post- surveys were administered to the teachers and the students.

A Brief History of Social-Emotional Learning

In 1991, the Early Mental Health Initiative (EMHI), The School-Based Early Mental Health Intervention and Prevention Services Act was passed. In consultation with the superintendent of public instruction, this Californian legislation authorized the director of health care services to provide matching grants to local educational agencies to pay the state share of the costs of providing school-based early mental health intervention and prevention services to eligible pupils at-risk students in grades K-3.

Essential in SEL is the seminal work of Goleman (1995), who considered a new way of looking at emotional intelligence (EQ). Emotional intelligence covers a range of behavioral strengths, such as self-motivation, empathy, self-awareness, impulse control, and persistence. In the early 2000s, the No Child Left Behind movement (NCLB, 2002), motivated district administrators to focus on academic achievement across schools in the U.S. SEL was used as a tool to support student academic achievement as good citizens and productive members of society. This concept of the *good citizen* has been woven through American society for generations. "Throughout history, many countries have had two primary goals for education. These goals are to help individuals become *intelligent* and *good citizens*" (Kaya & Erison, 2024, p. 5).

In a more modernized and clinical phraseology, Paccione-Dyszlewski (2023) said, Being a productive and model citizen takes kindness, compassion, and empathy toward others. Sometimes this requires extra tolerance, especially of people whose beliefs and attitudes are different from ours. This extra effort is usually appreciated by the other person and helps us learn more about those who are different from us. (para. 2)

Teachers encourage students to be good citizens at school and off campus. “Undeniably, globalization is a complex and multidimensional phenomena,” and “Within this context, education is called on to prepare young people for multiple and evolving forms of citizenship” (Lapayese, 2003, p. 493). There is an awareness of other cultures and continents beyond the United States, where children have been given opportunities to think about people outside of their culture and to become interested in aspects of the greater good, be it Climate Change and Earth Day.

“In today’s globally competitive industrialized world, it seems that the more we learn about the conditions needed to nurture development, competence and character, the more we see those exact conditions being eroded” (Miller, 2016, p. 98). Historically, SEL was to support each student in their academic achievements whereas the purpose of SEL in post-pandemic teaching was to instill mindfulness, self-worth, and self-care. There is an urgency toward fostering resiliency skills in American children and youth. The conscious ideological shift has been from how our children can grow up to contribute to our national and global society to an essential belief and survival message with psychological underpinnings. Today, the sentiments are that - every person matters and one’s life matters whether one goes to college or not.

Education, SEL, and The Pandemic

During the pandemic, the Committee for Children provided a complete online digital curriculum in response to Emergency Distance Learning (Committee for Children, 2021). Many California schools and schools nationwide created online schools in response to the pandemic. The uncertainty of the spreading of the virus before the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were issued, sent many of the public-school population home.

Parents send their children to *Cloud Classes*, a school entirely online or in a hybrid format. The teachers asked SEL para-educators to Zoom into their classes to give the children more support. Many parents gave their children pets, fish, and hamsters during the pandemic to help with the loneliness of being at home and away from their peers. Oftentimes, the pets died. The children needed time to process this grief and loss. The lower elementary teachers resourced a SEL para-educator to teach a grief and loss lesson and give extra support as the children shared.

Social and Emotional Learning has shifted from teaching beginning character development, to expressing feelings, to mindfulness and self-regulation, empathy, and inclusivity of others to selfcare. The concept of *self-care* which has been added to the list of new mental health and well-being vocabulary words, be it the classroom or staff lounge. For example, books like *A Good Egg* feature self-care as a theme (John & Oswald, 2019), wherein the illustrated character is an egg which leaves home to go on a journey which leads him to self-care. The Good Egg says, “Out there, on the road, under the stars, I really tried to focus on myself and what I needed” (p. 18). The illustrations depict the Good Egg sitting in a hammock, to then engage in the

following activities represented in the script.

I took walks. I read books. I floated in the river. I wrote in my journal. I found simple moments to be quiet. I breathed in. I breathed out. I even started painting. For once, I found time for me. And guess what? Little by little, the cracks in my shell started to heal. And my head no longer felt scrambled.

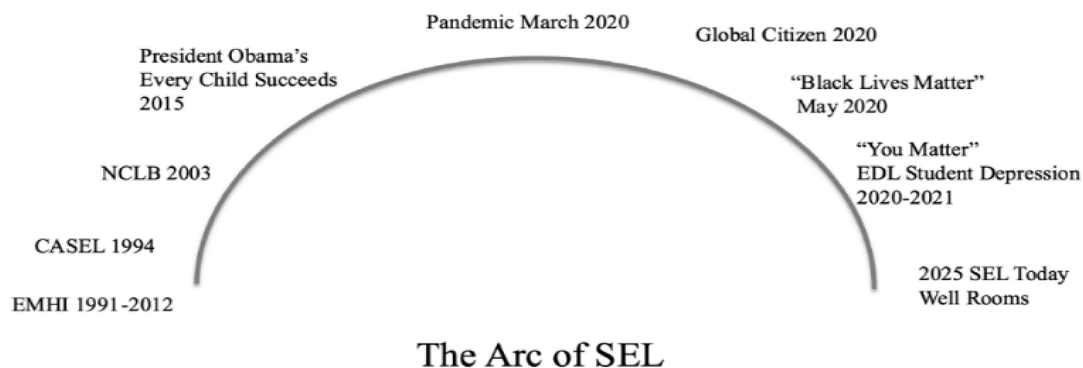
(John & Oswald, 2019, p. 22).

This children's book considers the ways in which an elementary school age child could lean into living and enjoying life through self-care which supports mental health and well-being. Children's hospitals support both physical and mental health needs of children and youth. "Student mental health and well-being, student social emotional development, and school diversity, equity, and inclusion have risen to become the top strategic priorities among school and district survey respondents, representing a dramatic shift since the onset of COVID-19" (Tyton Partners, 2021, p. 6). Pediatric Hospitals, such as Children's Hospital of Orange County, have made it a point to provide mental health resources for children. "Children's mental health is as important as their physical health. It's not always obvious when a child is struggling emotionally but recognizing the symptoms and seeking early and effective mental health services are important for long-term health" (Children's Hospital of Orange County, 2024, para. 1).

In summary, a global pandemic caused a redirection and application of SEL in the school community. This focus changed from strategic futuristic academic goals setting (college entrance and acceptance) to an internal and integrated sense of value and lived experience that embraces today (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Arc of SEL (Caldwell, 2025)



Changes in the Application of Social and Emotional Learning over time.

The Study's Data Collection Method

As aforementioned, this phenomenological field study examined 72 Kindergarten and 1st Grade children's responses to the explicit teaching of the social and emotional learning curriculum *Second Step*. Each grade level was given four lessons specific to the grade level and reflected normative classroom and playground problems and experiences. An intake- and post-sessions survey was administered to the children.

The teachers' pre-and post-surveys included 23 questions on a Likert scale with three fill-in-the-blank questions. The Teacher Survey's reflect the teachers' feedback about the behavior the children exhibited before and after these lessons. The questions and responses covered the four areas of Executive Functioning, Empathy Peer Relations/Self-Regulation and Problem Solving. The teachers completed this information on each student. The children's surveys included five questions which asked the children to draw or write their responses before and after the intervention activities with the *Second Step* lessons.

The data collection instrument was constructed to measure student assessment and application of relatable concepts, namely executive functioning, self-regulation, empathy, mindfulness, and problem-solving are all part of social and emotional learning. The researcher sought to identify correlations between the teacher pre- and post-surveys that were found in kindergarten and first grade. Correlations became evident in four sections of the Teacher Survey were Executive Functioning, Empathy, Peer Relationships/Self-Regulation and Problem Solving (Table 1).

Table 1
Teacher Survey Correlations

Variables	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		DIF in R-Value
	R-Value	P-Value	R-Value	P-Value	
Wednesday first grade					
Empathy and Peer Relations	.420	.033	.567	.003	.147
Tuesday first grade					
Self-Regulation & Anger Management and Peer Relations	.451	.035	.542	.009	.091
Self-Regulation & Anger Management and Empathy	.590	.004	.654	<.001	.064
Empathy and Executive Functioning	.754	<.001	.808	<.001	.054
Friday kindergarten					
Self-Regulation & Anger Management and Peer Relations			.602	.002	.602
Self-Regulation & Anger Management and Empathy	.628	.001	.866	<.001	.238
Self-Regulation & Anger Management and Executive Functioning	.568	.005	.758	<.001	.190
Empathy and Executive Functioning	.579	.004	.758	<.001	.179

In all three classes, the children's responses indicated a change between the pre- and post-survey results. In statistical analysis, the correlation is of significance because the likelihood of having a numerical increase between a pre- and post-survey is beyond probability. And, in those significant outcomes there were cause and effect relationships to be seen in the Teacher Post Survey data. For example, in the Tuesday first grade class when children practiced executive functioning, they were more empathetic. As an observation, the more children conscientiously participated in order in the classroom, this organized environment allowed the children to be more generous of themselves and kind to others.

Findings and Statistical Correlations

Teacher Survey Responses

In the Wednesday first grade class, empathy and peer relations had a moderate positive correlation in the pre-survey, and a moderate positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between empathy and peer relations was stronger after the post-survey. The pre- and post-teacher survey results revealed a correlation between social-emotional competencies, including empathy, executive functioning, self-regulation and anger management, and peer relations (Table 1).

In Tuesday's first grade class, self-regulation and anger management and peer relations had a moderate positive correlation in the pre-survey, and a moderate positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between empathy and peer relations was stronger after the post-survey. In Tuesday's first grade class, empathy and executive functioning had a strong correlation in the pre-survey, and a strong positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between empathy and executive functioning was stronger after the post-survey.

Kindergarten Teacher Survey Results

In the Friday kindergarten class, self-regulation, anger management, and peer relations had no correlation in the pre-survey, and a moderate positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between self-regulation, anger management and peer relations was stronger after the post-survey. In the Friday kindergarten class, self-regulation, anger management and empathy had a moderate positive correlation in the pre-survey, and a strong positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between empathy and peer relations was stronger after the post-survey. In the Friday kindergarten class, self-regulation and anger management and executive functioning had a moderate positive correlation in the pre-survey, and a strong positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between was stronger after the post-survey. In the Friday kindergarten class, empathy and executive functioning had a moderate positive correlation in the pre-survey and a strong positive correlation in the post-survey. The strength of the correlation between empathy and executive functioning was stronger after the post-survey.

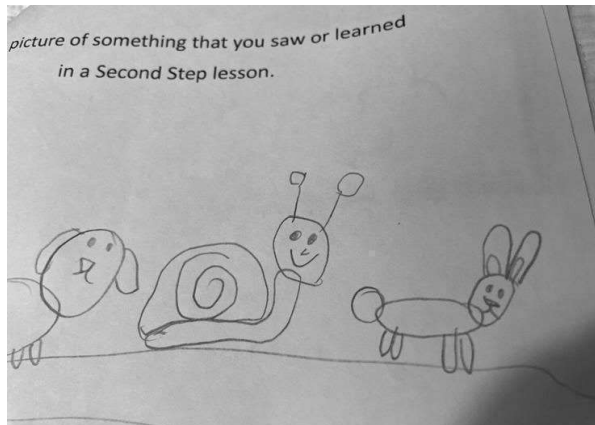
Kindergarten and 1st Grade Children's Posts-Survey Drawings and Written Responses

These selected examples of the children's post-survey drawings depict what they were thinking about and the observations they made after the four Second Step lessons by the guest presenter,

i.e., this researcher. The Children's Post Survey prompt read, "Draw a picture of something that you saw or learned in a Second Step lesson."

Figure 2

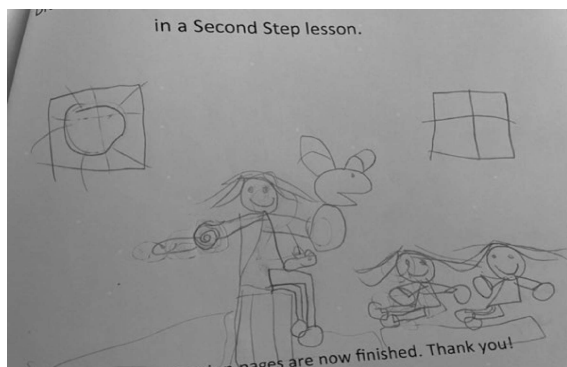
Kindergarten: Puppy, Snail, and Quiet Bunny



This Friday kindergarten student has drawn all three of the Second Step characters, Puppy, Snail and Quiet Bunny. Young children are naturally connected and aware of the Animal Kingdom. This genuine interest in nature and or stuffed animal puppets resonates with them.

Figure 3

Kindergarten: Second Step Hand Puppets

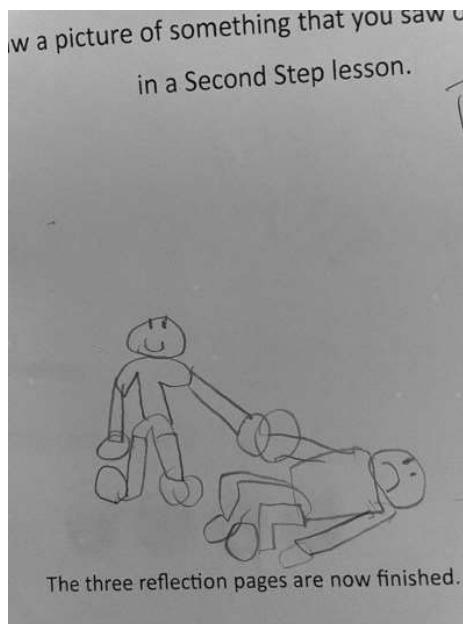


This Friday kindergarten student has drawn the guest presenter/researcher teaching the children on the carpet. The hand puppet skit takes place during the last five minutes of the 20-minute presentation. The kindergarten student has drawn the researcher with Puppy, Snail, and Quiet Bunny. The student has drawn the details of Quiet Bunny, who has been placed on the guest presenter's knee. The Puppy has been drawn with his mouth open. He is the speaker. This drawing is significant in that the child drew all three of the puppets. Quiet Bunny did not appear as a

character until Lesson 3, Peer Relationships/Self-Regulation. The placement of the figures demonstrates thought which is in keeping with Engel's research and discussion (2021, p.19). The guest teacher with all the puppets stood out in the child's memory.

Figure 4

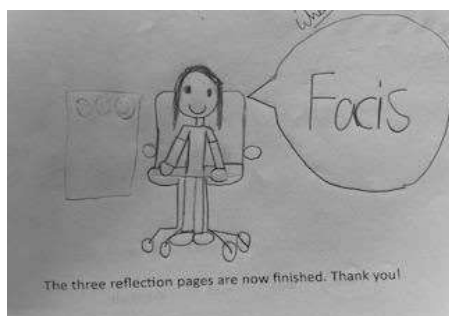
Kindergarten "Helping Up"



The Friday kindergarten student has drawn one happy student who is helping up a sad student. This drawing depicts two different feelings that students experience at school and the logical action of helping someone who has fallen down. The drawing depicts the understanding of the child that the lessons were about helping others. The child has drawn emotions, and the one student is showing empathy to the other.

Figure 5

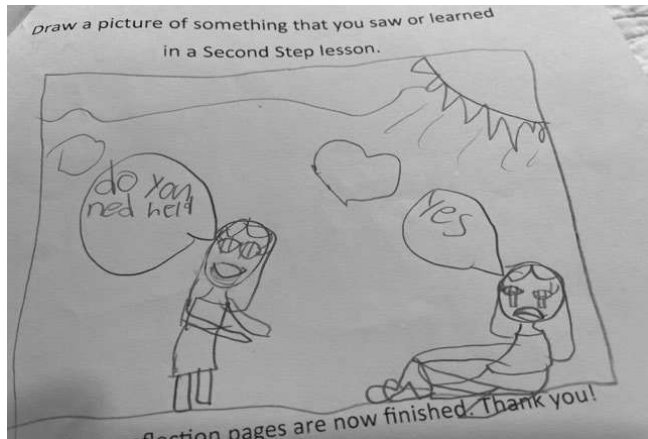
First Grade the Researcher has been drawn. She is saying "Focus"



The Tuesday First-grade student has drawn the researcher sitting in a chair with wheels. The researcher is depicted as telling the students that they need to "Focis." A poster with faces was drawn to the researcher's side. The misspelling of the word "Focus" reflects the developing literacy of the first-grade student.

Figure 6

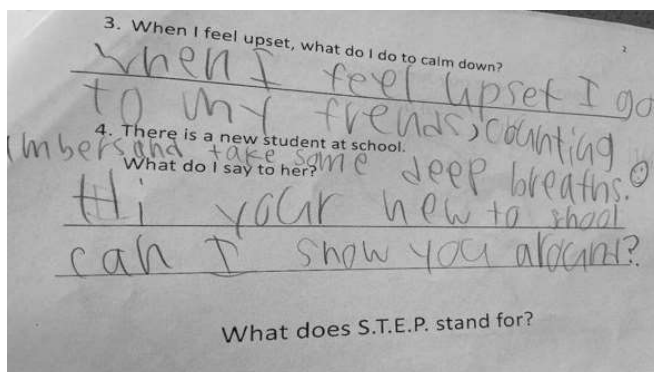
First Grade "Do you need help?"



The Tuesday first-grade student has drawn two girls in a conversation. One child is sad and is on the ground. The other student is asking if she needs help. "Do you need help". The response in the communication bubble is "yes." The child has attended to the detail of the child on the ground holding her knee. She also has a sad face and tearful eyes. The expression of the child who is offering to help has the arms extended in the direction of helping.

Figure 7

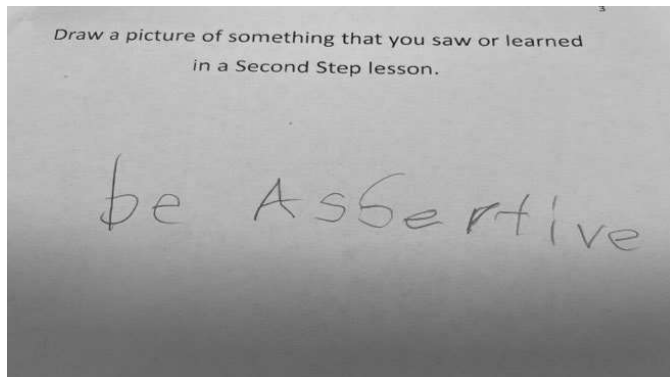
First Grade Post Child Survey Question 3 & 4 "Written Responses"



The first-grade student has written responses to the questions 3 and 4. The child has left out the letter "i" in the word "friends." "When I feel upset, I go to my friends, counting numbers and taking deep breaths." "Hi, your new to school can I show you around?" These written responses are right on point in terms of answering the questions. The student has shared the concepts of self-regulation in the event they need to calm down. Also, the student knows how to have a welcoming attitude and interact with new friends.

Figure 8

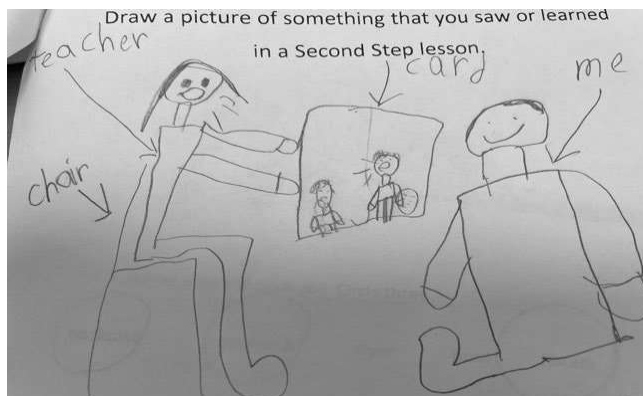
First Grade "Be Assertive"



The Tuesday first-grade student has resonated with the researcher's Second Step principle, "Be Assertive." This expression is depicted on the Second Step poster, "Skills for Learning."

Figure 9

First Grade "Child's Labeled Drawing"



The Wednesday first-grade student has drawn the researcher teaching with the Second Step Lesson picture cards. The student has also included himself/herself in the drawing. The student has taken the time to label the drawing. The student has drawn conversation and speaking lines to depict

voice. This drawing depicts explicit teaching. The picture card depicts communication/speaking. The child wants to communicate to the reader his/her understanding of the presentation. This is an interactive not static expression of learning. The child wants the reader to comprehend what took place by communicating with arrows and labels. In a sense, the student is teaching the reader.

Insights and Recommendations

The STEP Poster

At the beginning of the fourth in-person teaching lesson for all three classes, the researcher shared the Second Step curriculum poster. The poster has the acronym, S.T.E.P., which stands for *Say the Problem, Think of Solutions, Explore the Consequences, and Pick the Best Solution*. The concept of the acronym may be illusive to children in the lower elementary school grades. As a recommendation to assist early language learners, pictures of a student talking for the letter *S* or *Say the Problem* would be more helpful to understanding. Then a lightbulb next to a brain for *T* or *Think of Solutions*, Third, *E* and *Explore* could be a flashlight on a path, for *Explore Consequences*. Fourth, would be a picture related to *P* for *Pick the Best Solution*. There could be three mismatched socks and one pair of matching socks. and/or simplifying the word on the poster to read, *SAY THINK EXPLORE PICK*. It is by way of these suggestions that STEP posters could be reconfigured for the kindergarten-age level to support the pre-literacy stages of children's understanding and development.

Boys and Their Approach to Learning

Boys need time to process and consider what has been taught to them. Allowing children *think time* is a typical teacher's skill set and best practices. Educator Mary Budd Rowe was the initiator and proponent of this teaching practice, according to D'Orio (1999). Allowing children to rest after recess gives them a chance to reset for the remainder of the afternoon. The boys' survey responses exhibited stronger emotional content. Giving time for boys to share their feelings may be dependent on the time allotted for them to formulate their words and sentences.

For further research, content of the children's post survey drawings could be placed in categories such as drawings with emotions, drawings that focus on the teacher, drawings that are puppet centered, drawings that are creative, and drawings with similar or exact reconstruction of the Second Step lesson picture and content details. For further research, will the boys' drawings cluster in one or more of the categories and will the girls' drawings cluster in one or more of the categories. Similarities and differences can be noted.

Environment and Demographic

It would be helpful to teach students' needs and articulated interests in a local setting. Bethaney Wilkinson (2021) writes, "Culture comprises of stories, values, behaviors, artifacts, assumptions, and priorities [...] New York is different from Seattle, which is different from Chicago, which is different from Los Angeles" (pp. 108-109).

For students new to a school, having an SEL curriculum that depicts nuance to a local community's culture, may facilitate and help student integration and lessen the grief and loss of moving location. Moving locations may include missing friends, relatives, favorite venues of play,

restaurants, entertainment; in short, they miss what children look forward to. These relationships and locations are touchstones to a thriving childhood experience. Taken away, it leaves children and youth in emotional need. One recommendation is an intervention of community nuance SEL which takes place when a student relocates. This will help students to connect with caring and trained professionals and make new friends in an interactive group time.

Children's literature in picture book form, such as *The Three Bears of the Pacific Northwest* by Vaughan and Crews (2016), is a location-specific book with which children who live in this area can identify. Whether it be rain or snow, or dust storms. Within 30 minutes of teaching and guest presenting time for SEL, the Second Step picture cards could reference location and setting, or challenges that are related to this particular area. Going forward, the children's literature, which is recommended as a component, could support the overall lesson.

Climate Change

Because geographic location has become an increasingly important news-related item, the multifaceted aspect of weather incidents related to school age children and their families' needs to be addressed. The researcher recommends the use of situational cards that are specific to climate change. Talking about the problem with children will give them a chance to debrief what they have heard on television or heard their parents talking about at home. Many children have relatives or family members who live in different locations across the United States. Children who participate in the Second Step lesson discussions have access to cognitive learning resources which are research-based. These encounters can be considered therapeutic, and well-being supports.

Well Rooms on Elementary School Campuses

A Well Room is a designated room or space where students receive services that support mental health and wellbeing. With the recent passing of the California State Law, AB 2711, (California Legislature, 2024) students who are found with contraband are no longer expelled from the school campus but may opt in for in-house suspension. Well Rooms are the logical place of resource for those students recovering from addiction at the middle school and high school level. Grant-funded therapists or social workers keep hours in the Well Room during the school day. For elementary school children, Well Rooms give young children a place to feel safe and supported in the event there is a bullying incident at recess or a sense of loss in the family, or feelings of missing Mom and home life. Well Rooms also can provide basic needs for children such as food, clothing and school supplies. "An inclusive school is a school that fosters acceptance and a sense of belonging for students. It is also a school where students feel safe. Acceptance and safety are traits integral to the development and maintenance of school connectedness" (Akhavan et al., 2017, p. 435).

Well Rooms have the potential for educational opportunities in small groups and one-on-one teaching. The Second Step digital curriculum can be shared on a flat screen if the Well Room has this feature. Other forms of support such as SEL literature, music, sandboxes, fidgets, coloring books, and celebration boards which is a place to share written forms of gratitude and or praises of others.

Going Forward

With the research information provided in the past, the Early Mental Health Initiative (EMHI, 1991) and the present standing of the successful application of the Second Step concepts in the curriculum taught and examined in this study, the conclusions and outcomes benefit parent groups such as the child development agencies, children's hospitals, and libraries. On public school campuses, implementing a Well-Room provides students with a place at school for support. If children are experiencing bullying or peer conflicts and need resolution and intermediators, a Well-Room provides a safe environment to regroup and take a break. Providing the Second Step curriculum as a resource to help children, youth, and teens get back on track and experience a positive rest of the day and week is of utmost importance. Giving students the tools necessary to process conflict and how to mitigate going forward is of great value.

This body of information and research will also support district curriculum administrators in purchasing their social-emotional curricula for grades K-1. The findings of this research support the furtherance and appreciation for the Second Step curriculum for young children in Kindergarten to First grade. The data supports the correlation of the findings and is particularly worthwhile and of benefit, given the cultural changes in the teaching of social and emotional learning in the United States. Committee for Children in its humanitarian efforts as a nonprofit will continue to keep up with the trends in society and the needs of children in a highly digital, technological, global, and ever-changing modern age. (Committee for Children, 2025, para. 1).

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